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Why are crime rates falling?

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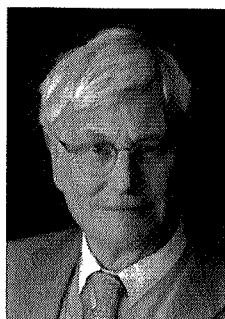
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WHY ARE CRIME RATES FALLING?



The European Crime Falls: Security Driven?

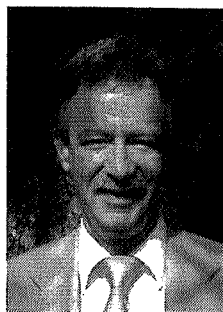
By Jan van Dijk

The idea that crime is going down has reached the public eye, most notably in The Netherlands where the government has announced plans to close down several prisons due to a lack of prisoners. The concept of a crime drop poses two fundamental challenges to criminology. First, the discipline must reach consensus on the facts. Secondly, criminologists should, ideally, reach a global consensus on the main causes of the drop.

First the statistical facts. As discussed in detail elsewhere (van Dijk 2008) police statistics on recorded crimes cannot be safely used as measures of either the volume or trends in crime. Victimization surveys should be the primary source of information. Fortunately, these are now readily available.

The International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) results indicate a levelling off of the rise in crime and significant drops in burglaries and car thefts for most participating

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General Crime Drop: Where? When? Why?

By Martin Killias

Europeans tend to see their continent as something like a replication of America, with a time-lag of a few years. We are, therefore, inclined to presume automatically that crime "must" drop now also in Europe, since it started to do so in the United States more than a decade ago. Against such "natural" beliefs, data have little chance to prevail, even if they suggest nuances. We shall try the exercise.

Obviously and as we know from stock-exchange markets, no trend will eternally continue as it started. In the same vein, there is no reason why crime should increase way into the future. Even over the last 30 years, there were many crimes that decreased. This has been true for car theft after the generalisation of steering-wheel locks, for motorcycle theft after the adoption of laws making wearing crash-helmets compulsory, and for obscene phone calls after caller identification (caller ID) became a generally available option. During the same period, other offences,

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Are Crime Rates Falling in Italy?

By Eugenio Arcidiacono and Rossella Selmini

Marzio Barbagli in 1999 organized a conference in Bologna with the title "Why are Crime Rates Falling in the United States?"

Publication of the papers raised a widespread debate about crime trends (Barbagli 2000). Italy, however, at that time was experiencing a remarkable increase in crime rates. Increases, mostly for property crime, and particularly burglary, continued for nearly 40 years. Italy's unexpectedly strong economic performance qualified it to join the club of high-crime societies (Garland 2001).

The data we discuss are based on crime reported to the police (the so called *Statistiche della delittuosità*). Data from national victimization surveys are available only for 1997 and 2002. Data from the 2007 survey are not yet

available.

Figure 1 (on page 17) shows official data on recorded crime in Italy for 1967-2008. Part A shows recorded total crime in absolute numbers (not rates) with a steady rise through 1991 followed by a period of fluctuation and a second peak in 2007. Parts B and C show similar data for theft and robbery, which reveal a broadly similar pattern. Part D shows attempted and completed homicide.

Differently from the United States and many other European countries, which have experienced general crime declines in the past ten or fifteen years or longer, Italy from the 1970s through the '90s experienced an almost uninterrupted increase in property crimes (except bag-snatching). Some violent crimes, especially robberies, but not homicide, also increased. After 1991 the linear increase shifted to a more variable trend, with some ups and some

downs, but in 2007 a second peak was reached--even higher than in 1991.

In 2008 something different happened: a strong (8%) decrease occurred in the overall crime rate everywhere in the country, and even more pronouncedly in areas of Northern Italy that had witnessed in the past the largest increases. The 2008 drop was driven by major decreases in thefts and robberies (to the contrary, assaults were still increasing).

It is too early to say that crime is falling in Italy, following a more international tendency, but the strong and widespread change in 2008 raises the possibility. Preliminary data for 2009 provisionally confirm the possible fall. Only if this trend continues for some

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"Security Driven?"

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nations¹. Trends in individual countries such as Switzerland and Ireland (both formerly low-crime nations) may be somewhat delayed but a drop in crime around 1995-2000 seems to be the norm.

Those wary of the relatively small sample sizes of the ICVS can check its results against findings of national victimisation surveys. These have been annually carried out among huge samples of the public in several European countries, including England and Wales, The Netherlands, and several Scandinavian countries, for fifteen years or more. Figure 1 shows results for burglary.

The available, survey-based evidence shows unambiguously that in most European countries household burglary rates turned around in 1995-2000 (and car theft five years earlier). It is not only rates of property crime that were universally lower in 2010 than in 1995. The statistics show that crime increased linearly between 1980 and 1995 and has decreased since then.

This universal curvilinear pattern poses a well-defined question for criminology theory. What

known criminogenic factors increased for twenty years or more, peaked around 1995, and have declined ever since?

The crime drop in the USA started some years earlier. Our American colleagues have had an enviable head start in the search for explanations. Their favourite explanatory factors are a reduction in the crack trade, increased incarceration, better policing, economic growth, and liberalization of abortion laws. From the European competition the crack factor can be eliminated at the outset since there never was a crack epidemic in Europe.

Liberalization of abortion laws seems an unlikely contender because its timing shows huge variation across Europe (in some countries abortion was liberalized before this happened in the

USA and in others it was never liberalized).

In my tentative view, the claims for better policing and increased incarceration, though obviously valid to some extent in the United States, are not very promising in a European context either. These factors show diverging trends in Europe (for example, incarceration rates tripled in the UK and the Netherlands, dropped in Finland, and remained stable in France).

The conventional economic explanations seem equally insufficient to explain the crime curve under scrutiny. Obviously, living conditions across Europe have not linearly deteriorated since 1980. And they have not improved linearly since 2000 either. According to economic cycle theories, crime rates should now be booming because of the

eventually begin to fall due to reductions in opportunities caused by improved self protection (van Dijk 1994).

When crime rates go up, marginal benefits of protective measures increase and at a certain point outweigh marginal costs. Potential victims will be ready to invest in security. When levels of crime prevention rise, the costs/benefits ratio of offending becomes less favourable. At some point offending starts to become economically unattractive. At this juncture crime rates will start to fall.² As was to be expected, the drop started in the USA a bit earlier than in Europe.

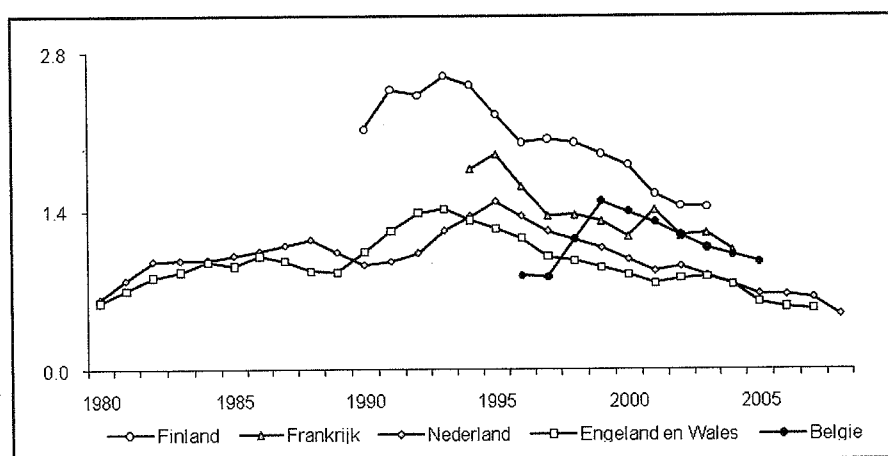
Statistics at the macro level, collected by the ICVS, confirm that across the developed world households have stepped up their investments in protection against property crime since 1980 in response to rising losses. I have dubbed this trend "responsive securitization" (van Dijk 2007). It may well have been the main driver of the crime falls.

Some American commentators are sceptical about the role of security. But several studies have demonstrated that the fall in car thefts has indeed been

largely caused by in-built security (e.g., Farrell et al. 2008). In a recent study, Ben Vollaard (2010) of Tilburg University assessed the effects of legislation that made state-of-the-art household security mandatory in houses built after 1999 in The Netherlands. He shows that burglary victimization rates in newly built houses were a quarter lower than in the older ones. There were no signs of displacement to other neighbourhoods in the city. The implementation of the new legislation alone has prevented the commission of 10,000 burglaries. The reduction has caused a drop in national burglary rates of over 7 percent.

This shows that large-scale implementation of security measures can have considerable effects on rates of property crimes. It suggests that crime

Figure 1: Burglary Trends in Rates of Victimization



current economic crisis and high levels of unemployment. So far, they have continued to fall.

In Europe, contextual theories of crime, known as situational crime prevention or opportunity theory, have had a considerable following among criminologists (most notably in the UK, the Netherlands, and Sweden) (e.g., Cohen and Felson 1979). These theories seem well-placed to explain the crime curve. Opportunity theory has no trouble explaining rises in crime together with the economic boom from 1970 or 1980 onwards.

It can also explain why the post-war crime boom started a bit later in war-stricken Europe than in the USA. Adherents of opportunity theory have predicted that levels of crime would

drops in Europe might be expected to be most pronounced in countries where situational crime prevention has been promoted as an official policy priority (e.g., the UK and The Netherlands) and less pronounced in countries where situational crime prevention has been ignored or resisted (e.g., Denmark).

The hypothesis of security-driven crime falls deserves further empirical testing. If it is confirmed, the policy implications are far-reaching. It would suggest that governments in Europe and the United States have unduly relied on the interventions by expensive state institutions such as police forces and prison departments to reduce crime. They might have gained better returns on investment if they had assisted the gentle but forceful hand of crime prevention rather than the iron fist of arrest and incarceration.

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(Endnotes)

1. Preliminary results were published in "What Comes Up, Goes Down" (ESC Newsletter, December, 2006). In January 2010 Andri Ahven of the Ministry of Justice in Tallin informed me that the latest repeat of the ICVS in Estonia in 2008 confirmed a continued crime drop in the country.

2. The costs/benefits ratios of offending are obviously also influenced by the opportunity costs of offending and by external factors such as policing and penal deterrence but in my view self protection by potential victims is the key factor in the equation. ■

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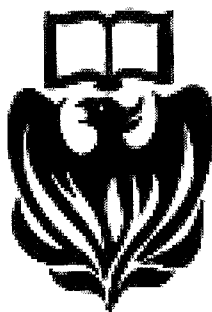
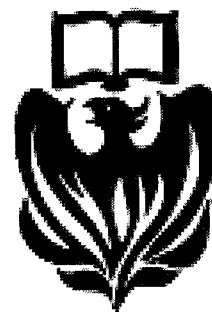
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